

The Archbishop's Christmas Gift

by Robert Barr.

ARRAS, blacksmith and armorer, stood at the door of his hut in the valley of the Alf, a league or so from the Mosselle, on a summer evening. He was the most powerful man in all the Alf-thal, and few could lift the iron sledge-hammer which he wielded as if it were a toy. Arras had twelve sons, scarcely less stalwart than himself, some of whom helped him in his occupation of blacksmith and armorer, while the others tilled the ground near by, earning from the rich soil of the valley what sustenance the whole family needed.

The blacksmith heard, coming up the valley of the Alf, the hoof-beats of a horse; and his quick, experienced ear told him, distant though the animal yet was, that one of its shoes was loose. As the hurrying rider came within call, the blacksmith shouted to him in stentorian tones:

"Friend, pause a moment, until I fasten again the shoe on your horse's foot."

"I cannot stop," was the brief answer.

"Then your animal will go lame," rejoined the blacksmith.

"Better lose the horse than an empire," replied the rider, hurrying on.

"Now what does that mean?" said the blacksmith to himself, as he watched the disappearing rider, while the click, click of the loosened shoe became fainter and fainter in the distance.

If the blacksmith could have followed the rider into Castle Bertrich, a short distance farther up the valley, he would speedily have learned the meaning of the hasty phrase the horseman had flung behind him as he rode past.

Ascending the winding road which led to the gates of the castle as hurriedly as the jaded condition of his beast would permit, the horseman paused, unloosed the horn from his belt, and blew a blast that echoed from the wooded hills all around. Presently an officer appeared

above the gateway, accompanied by two or three armed men, and demanded who the stranger was and why he asked admission. The horseman, amazed at the officer's ignorance of heraldry, which caused him to inquire as to his quality, answered with some haughtiness:

"I, messenger of the Archbishop of Treves, demand instant audience with Count Bertrich."

The officer, without reply, disappeared from the castle walls, and presently the great leaves of the gate were thrown open, whereupon the horseman rode his tired animal into the courtyard and flung himself off. "My horse's shoe is loose," he said to the captain. "I ask you to have your armorer immediately attend to it."

"In truth," replied the officer, shrugging his shoulders, "there is more drinking than fighting in Castle Bertrich; consequently, we do not possess an armorer. If you want blacksmithing done you must betake yourself to armorer Arras in the valley, who will put either horse or armor right for you."

With this the messenger was forced to be content, and begging the attendant who took charge of his horse to remember that it had traveled far, and had still, when rested, a long journey before it, he followed the captain into the great rittersaal of the castle, where, on entering, after having been announced, he found the Count of Bertrich sitting at the head of a long table, a gigantic wine-flagon in hand, which he was industriously emptying.

Extending down each side of the table were numerous nobles, knights, and warriors, who, to judge by the hasty glance bestowed upon them by the archbishop's messenger, seemed to be following energetically the example set them by their lord at the head.

Count Bertrich's hair was unkempt, his face a purplish red, his eyes bloodshot, and his corselet, open at the throat, showed the great bull-neck of the man, on whose gigantic frame constant dissipation seemed to have only temporary effect.

"Well!" roared the nobleman, in a voice that made the rafters ring. "What would you with Count Bertrich?"

"I bear an urgent despatch to you from my lord the Archbishop of Treves," replied the messenger.

"Then down on your knees and present it," cried the count, beating the table with his flagon.

"I am envoy of his lordship of Treves," said the messenger sternly.

"You told us that before," cried the count; "and now you stand in the hall of Bertrich. Kneel, therefore, to its master."

"I represent the archbishop," reiterated the messenger, "and I kneel to none but God and the Emperor."

Count Bertrich rose somewhat uncertainly to his feet, his whole frame trembling with anger, volleying forth oaths upon threats. The tall nobleman at his right hand also rose, as did many of the others who sat at the table. The tall nobleman, placing hand on the arm of his furious host, said warningly:

"My lord count, the man is right. It is against the feudal law that he should kneel or that you should demand it. The Archbishop of Treves is your overlord, as well as ours, and it is not fitting that his messenger should bend the knee before us."

"That is truth; the feudal law," muttered others down each side of the table.

The enraged count glared upon them one after another, partially subdued by their breaking away from him.

The envoy stood calm and collected, awaiting the outcome of the tumult. The count, cursing the absent archbishop and his present guests with equal impartiality, sat slowly down again, and, flinging his empty flagon at an attendant, demanded that it should be refilled. The others now resumed their seats, and the count cried out, but with less of truculence in his tone:

"What message sent the archbishop to Castle Bertrich?"

"His lordship the Archbishop of Treves requires me to inform Count Bertrich and the assembled nobles that the Hungarians have forced passage across the Rhine and are now about to make their way through the defiles of the Eifel into this valley, intending then to march upon Treves, lay that ancient city in ruin, and carry havoc over the surrounding country. His lordship commands you, Count Bertrich, to rally your men about you and hold the infidels in check in the defiles of the Eifel until the archbishop, at the head of his army, comes to your relief from Treves."

There was deep silence in the large hall after this startling announcement; then the count replied:

"Tell the Archbishop of Treves that, if the lords of the Rhine cannot keep back the Hungarians, it is hardly likely that we, less powerful, near the Moselle can do it."

"His lordship urges instant compliance

with his request, and I am to say that you refuse at your peril. A few hundred men can hold the Hungarians in check while they are passing through the narrow ravines of the Eifel, while as many thousands might not be as successful against them should they once reach the open valleys of the Alf and the Moselle. His lordship would also have you further know that this campaign is as much

in your own interest as in his; for the Hungarians, in their devastating march, spare neither the high nor the low."

"Tell his lordship," hiccupped the count, "that I sit safely in my castle of Bertrich, and I defy all the Hungarians that ever were let loose to disturb me therein. If the archbishop keep Treves as tightly as I shall hold Castle Bertrich, there is little to fear from the invaders."

"Am I to return to Treves, then, with your refusal?" asked the envoy.

"You may return to Treves as best pleases you, so that you rid us of your presence here, where you mar good company."

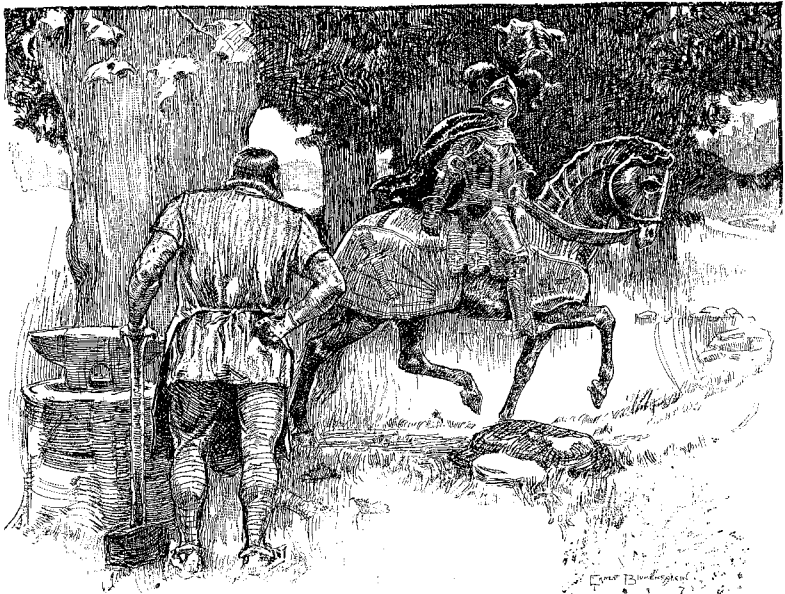
The envoy, without further speech, bowed to Count Bertrich, and also to the assembled nobles, then passed silently out of the hall, returning to the courtyard of the castle, where he demanded that his horse be brought to him.

"The animal has had but scant time for feeding and rest," said the captain.

"'Twill be sufficient to carry us to the blacksmith's hut," answered the envoy, as he put foot in stirrup.

The blacksmith, still standing at the door of his smithy, heard again, coming from the castle, the click of the broken shoe; but this time the rider drew up before him, and said:

"The offer of help which you tendered me on a previous occasion I shall now be glad to accept. Do your work well, smith, and know that in the performing



"BETTER LOSE THE HORSE THAN AN EMPIRE."

of it you are obliging the Archbishop of Treves."

The armorer raised his cap at the mention of the august name, and invoked a blessing upon the head of that renowned and warlike prelate.

"You said something," spoke up the smith, "of loss of empire, as you rode by. I trust there is no disquieting news from Treves."

"Disquieting enough," replied the messenger. "The Hungarians have crossed the Rhine, and are now making their way towards the defiles of the Eifel. There a hundred men could hold the infidels in check; but you breed a scurvy set of nobles in the Alf-thal, for Count Bertrich disdains the command of his overlord to rise at the head of his men and stay the progress of the invader until the archbishop can come to his assistance."

"Now out upon the drunken count for a base coward!" cried the armorer, in anger. "May his castle be sacked and himself hanged on the highest turret for refusing aid to his overlord in time of need. I and my twelve sons know every defile, ravine, pass, rock, and cave in the Eifel. Would the archbishop, think you, accept the aid of such underlings as we, whose only commendation is that our hearts are as stout as our sinews?"

"What better warranty could the archbishop ask than that?" replied the envoy. "If you can hold back the Hungarians for four or five days, then I doubt not that

whatever you ask of the archbishop will be speedily granted."

"We shall ask nothing," cried the blacksmith, "but his blessing, and be deeply honored in receiving it."

Whereupon the blacksmith, seizing his hammer, went to the door of his hut, where there hung outside what seemed to be part of a suit of armor, which served, at the same time, as a sign of his profession and as a tocsin. He smote the hanging iron with his sledge until the clangorous reverberation echoed through all the valley, and presently there came hurrying to him eight of his stalwart sons, who had been occupied in tilling the fields.

"Scatter ye," cried the blacksmith, "over all the land where my name is known. Rouse the people, and tell them the Hungarians are upon us. Urge all to collect here at the smithy before midnight, with whatever of arms or weapons they may be possessed. Those who have no arms let them bring poles for pike-handles, and your brothers and myself will busily make pike-heads of iron until they come. Tell them they are called to action by a lord from the Archbishop of Treves himself, and that I shall lead them. Tell them they fight for their homes, their wives, and their children. And now away!"

The eight young men at once dispersed in several directions. The smith himself shod the envoy's horse, and begged him to inform the archbishop that they would defend the passes of the Eifel while a man of them remained alive.

Long before midnight the peasants came straggling to the smithy from all quarters, and by daylight the blacksmith had led them over the volcanic hills to the lip of the tremendous pass through which the Hungarians must come. The sides of this chasm were precipitous and hundreds of feet in height. Even the peasants themselves, knowing the rocks as they did, could not have climbed from the bottom of the pass below to the height they now occupied. They had, therefore, little fear that the numerous Hungarians could

scale the walls and decimate their scanty band.

When the Hungarian army appeared, the blacksmith and his men rolled great stones and rocks down upon them, practically annihilating the advance-guard and throwing the whole army into confusion. The week's struggle that followed forms one of the most exciting episodes in German history. Again and again the Hungarians attempted the pass, but nothing could withstand the avalanche of stones and rocks with which they were overwhelmed. Nevertheless the devoted little band did not have things all their own way. They were so few, and they had to keep such close watch night and day, that before the week was out many turned longing eyes in the direction from which the archbishop's army was expected to come. It was not until the seventh day that help arrived; and then the archbishop's forces speedily put to flight the now demoralized Hungarians, and chased them once more across the Rhine.

"There is nothing now left for us to do," said the tired blacksmith to his little following; "so I will get back to my forge, and you to your farms." And this, without more ado, they did; the cheering and inspiring ring of iron on anvil awakening the echoes of the Alf-thal once again.

The blacksmith and his twelve sons were at their noon-day meal when an imposing cavalcade rode up to the smithy, at the head of which procession was the archbishop, and the blacksmith and his dozen sons were covered with confusion to think they had such a distinguished visitor, without the means of receiving him in accordance with his station. But the archbishop said:

"Blacksmith Arras, you and your sons would not wait for me to thank you, so I am now come to you, that in the presence of all these followers of mine I may pay fitting tribute to your loyalty and your great bravery."

Then indeed did the modest blacksmith consider he had received more than ample compensation for what he had done, which, after all, as he told his neighbors, was merely his duty; so why should a man be thanked for it?

"Blacksmith," said the archbishop, as he mounted his horse to return to Treves, "thanks cost little and are easily bestowed. I hope, however, to have a Christmas present for you which will show the whole country round how much I esteem true valor."



COUNT BERTRICH.

At the mouth of the Alf-thal, somewhat back from the small village of Alf and overlooking the Moselle, stands a conical hill that completely commands the valley. The Archbishop of Treves, having had such a lesson regarding the dangers of an incursion through the volcanic region of the Eifel, put some hundreds of men at work on this conical hill, and erected on the top a strong castle, which was the wonder of the country. The year was nearing its end when this great stronghold was completed, and it began to be known throughout the land that the archbishop intended to hold high Christmas revel there, and had invited to the castle all the nobles in the country, while the chief guest was no other than the emperor him-

though the peasants were jubilant that one of their caste should thus be singled out to receive the favor of the famous archbishop, and meet not only great nobles but the emperor himself, still it was gossiped that the barons grumbled at this distinction being placed upon a serf like blacksmith Arras, and none were so loud in their complaints as the Count Bertrich, who had remained drinking in the castle while the blacksmith fought for the land. Nevertheless all the nobility accepted the invitation of the powerful Archbishop of Treves, and assembled in the great room of the new castle, each equipped in all the gorgeousness of full armor.

It had been rumored among the nobles that the emperor would not permit the archbishop to sully the caste of knighthood by asking the barons to recognize or hold converse with one in humble station of life. Indeed, had it been otherwise, Count Bertrich, with the barons to back him, was resolved to speak out boldly to the emperor, upholding the privileges of his class, and protesting against insult to it in the presence of the blacksmith and his twelve sons.

When all assembled in the great hall they found at the center of the long side-wall a magnificent throne erected, with a dais in front of it; and on this throne sat the emperor in state, while at his right hand stood the lordly Archbishop



"THE BLACKSMITH HAD LED THEM OVER THE VOLCANIC HILLS."

self. Then the neighbors of the blacksmith learned that a Christmas gift was about to be bestowed upon that stalwart man. He and his twelve sons received notification to attend at the castle and enjoy the whole week's festivity. He was commanded to come in his leathern apron, and to bring his huge sledge-hammer with him, which, the archbishop himself said, had now become as honorable a weapon as a two-handed sword itself.

Never before had such an honor been bestowed upon a common man; and, al-

and Elector of Treves. But, what was more disquieting, they beheld also the blacksmith standing before the dais, some distance in front of the emperor, clad in his leathern apron, with his big, brawny hands folded over the top of the handle of his huge sledge-hammer. Behind him were ranged his twelve sons. There were deep frowns on the brows of the nobles when they saw this; and, after kneeling and protesting their loyalty to the emperor, they stood aloof and apart, leaving a clear space between themselves and the plebeian black-

smith, on whom they cast lowering looks.

When the salutations to the emperor had been given, the archbishop took a step forward on the dais, and spoke in a clear voice that could be heard to the farthest corner of the room.

"My lords," he said, "I have invited you hither that you may have the privilege of doing honor to a brave man. I ask you to salute the blacksmith Arras, who, when his country was in danger, crushed the invaders as effectually as ever his right arm, wielding sledge, crushed hot iron."

A red flush of confusion overspread the face of the blacksmith; but loud murmurs broke out among the nobility, and none stepped forward to salute him. One indeed stepped forward, but it was to appeal to the emperor.

"Your Majesty," said Count Bertrich, "this is an unwarranted breach of our privileges. It is not meet that we, holding noble names, should be asked to consort with an untitled blacksmith. I appeal to your Majesty against the archbishop under the feudal law."

All eyes turned upon the emperor, who, after a pause, spoke and said:

"Count Bertrich is right, and I sustain his appeal."

An expression of triumph came into the red, bibulous face of Count Bertrich, and the nobles shouted joyously:

"The emperor, the emperor!"

The archbishop, however, seemed in no way nonplussed by his defeat; but said, addressing the armorer:

"Advance, blacksmith, and do homage to your emperor and mine."

When the blacksmith knelt before the throne, the emperor, taking his jeweled sword from his side, smote him lightly on his broad shoulders, saying:

"Arise, Count Arras, noble of the German empire, and first lord of the Alf-thal."

The blacksmith rose slowly to his feet, bowed lowly to the emperor, and backed to the place where he had formerly stood, again resting his hands on the handle of his sledge-hammer.

The look of exultation faded from the face of Count Bertrich, and was replaced by an expression of dismay; for he had been, till that moment, himself first lord of the Alf-thal, with none second.

"My lords," once more spoke up the



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"MY LORDS, . . . I ASK YOU TO SALUTE THE BLACKSMITH."

archbishop, "I ask you to salute Count Arras, first lord of the Alf-thal."

No noble moved, and again Count Bertrich appealed to the emperor.

"Are we to receive on terms of equality," he said, "a landless man—a count of a blacksmith's hut, a first lord of a forge? For the second time I appeal to your Majesty against such an outrage."

The emperor replied calmly:

"Again I support the appeal of Count Bertrich."

There was this time no applause from the surrounding nobles; for many of them had some smattering idea of what was next to happen, although the muddled brain of Count Bertrich gave him no intimation of it.

"Count Arras," said the archbishop, "I promised you a Christmas gift when last I left you at your smithy door. I now bestow upon you and your heirs forever this castle of Burg Arras and the lands adjoining it. I ask you to hold it for me well and faithfully, as you held the pass of the Eifel. My lords," continued the archbishop, turning to the nobles, with a ring of menace in his voice, "I ask you to salute Count Arras, your equal in title, your equal in possessions, and the superior

of any one of you in patriotism and bravery. If any noble question his courage, let him neglect to give Count of Burg Arras his title and salutation as he passes before him."

"Indeed, and that will not I," said the tall noble who had sat at Bertrich's right hand in his castle; "for, my lords, if we hesitate longer, this doughty blacksmith will be emperor before we know it." Then advancing towards the ex-armorer, he said:

"My lord, Count of Burg Arras, it gives me pleasure to salute you and to hope that when emperor or archbishop are to be fought for your arm will be no less powerful in a coat of mail than it was when you wore a leathern apron."

One by one the nobles passed and saluted, as their leader had done, Count Bertrich hanging back until the last; then, as he passed the new Count of Burg Arras, he hissed at him, with a look of rage, the single word "*Blacksmith!*"

The Count of Burg Arras, stirred to sudden anger, and forgetting in whose presence he stood, swung his huge sledgehammer round his head, and brought it down on the armored back of Count Bertrich, roaring the word "*Anvil!*"

The armor splintered like crushed ice, and Count Bertrich fell prone on his face and lay there. There was instant cry of "Treason! treason!" and shouts of: "No man may draw arms in the emperor's presence."

"My lord emperor," cried the Count of Burg Arras, "I crave pardon if I have done amiss. A man does not forget the tricks of his old calling when he takes on new honors. Your Majesty has said that I am a count. This man, having heard your Majesty's word, proclaims me blacksmith, and so gives the lie to his emperor. For this I struck him, and would again, even though he stood before the throne in a palace or the altar in a cathedral. If that be treason, take from me your hon-

ors and let me back to my forge, where this same hammer will mend the armor it has broken or beat him out a new back-piece."

"You have broken no tenet of the feudal law," said the emperor. "You have broken nothing, I trust, but the count's armor; for, as I see he is arousing himself, doubtless no bones are broken. The feudal law does not regard a blacksmith's hammer as a weapon. And as for treason, Count of Burg Arras, may my throne always be surrounded by such treason as yours!"

And for centuries after, the descendants of the blacksmith were Counts of Burg Arras and held the castle of that name, whose ruins to-day attest the excellence of the archbishop's building.